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SONNETS FROM THE PORTUGUESE







Elizabeth Bane (Browning



AND OTHER POEMS

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

ONE WORD MORE

AND OTHER POEMS

ROBERT BROWNING

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY RICHARD WATSON GILDER

NEW YORK
The Century Co
1905

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INTRODUCTION

I

In the very heart and center of our modern world of the nine-teenth century there was enacted and immortally sung one of the most exquisite love-histories of which the world has knowledge. The marriage of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett has been well named "the most perfect example of wedded happiness in the history of literature—perfect in the inner life and perfect in its poetical expression." 1

¹ The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Edited with Biographical Additions by Frederic G. Kenyon.

Robert Browning, the brilliant author of "Bells and Pomegranates," and Elizabeth Barrett,1 the popular and beloved poet, but also the secluded invalid, had friends in common. One of them was Robert Hengist Horne, the author of "Orion." In the preparation of a work of literary criticism, "A New Spirit of the Age," he had the help of friends, his "powerful and most valuable" coadjutor being Miss Barrett. Horne afterward made public "the fact that the mottoes, which are singularly happy and appropriate, were for the most part supplied by Miss Barrett and Robert Browning, then unknown to each other."2

¹ Robert Browning was born in the parish of St. Giles, Camberwell, London, May 7, 1812, and died in Venice, December 12, 1889. Elizabeth Barrett Moulton Barrett was born at Coxhoe Hall, near Durham, March 6, 1806, and died in Florence, June 29, 1861.

In April, 1842, Miss Barrett pleases her blind mentor, Mr. Boyd, by telling him, at his request, the names of those who have liked her articles the "Athenæum" on the Greek poets. "Mr. Horne, the poet, and Mr. Browning were not behind in appreciation," she says; and "Mr. Browning is said to be learned in Greek, especially in the dramatists." In the next April she is writing to Mr. Cornelius Matthews in America, and again looms the name of Browning. "I do assure you," she says, " I never saw him in my life-do not know him even by correspondence - and yet, whether through fellow-feeling for Eleusinian mysteries, or whether through the more generous motive of appreciation of his Addressed to Robert Hengist Horne, with Comments on Contemporaries. Edited by S. R. Townshend Mayer.

act more fateful, to bring to her the poet himself. "Kenyon the magnificent," Browning called him, as Bayard Taylor tells us; and it was to this "dear friend and relative" that Mrs. Browning inscribed her lyric "The Dead Pan." Mr. Kenyon, says Mrs. Orr, had often spoken to the Browning family of his invalid cousin, and had given them copies of her works. As early as 1841, indeed, Kenyon had tried to bring about a meeting between the poets, but Miss Barrett had shrunk from it. But when the poet returned to England, late in 1844, he saw the volume containing "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," which had appeared during his absence, and which Kenyon had sent to Miss Browning. "On hearing him express his admiration of it, Kenyon begged him to write to Miss Barrett, and himself tell her how the poems had impressed him; 'for,' he added, 'my cousin is a great invalid, and sees no one; but great souls jump at sympathy.'"

At this time, be it remembered, Elizabeth Barrett was an accepted poet in both England and America, while Robert Browning was slowly approaching, through both critical depreciation and approval, the assured fame of his after years. When, therefore, the young Browning read in "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" words of high recognition, his keen appreciation of the writer's genius, and his natural desire for a wider audience, gave the lines to him a very special importance. How familiar now to

¹Life and Letters of Robert Browning, by Mrs. Sutherland Orr. For Browning's own account of this see his lettter to E. B. B., postmarked November 17, 1845.

the world the stanza is, with its large associations:

Or at times a modern volume, Wordsworth's solemn-thoughted idyl,

Howitt's ballad-verse, or Tennyson's

enchanted reverie, -

Or from Browning some "Pomegranate," which, if cut deep down the middle,

Shows a heart within blood-tinctured,

of a veined humanity.

The correspondence that began with Browning's letter to Elizabeth Barrett of January 10, 1845, and the meeting which took place on May 20th of the same year, led quickly to a great love—amply and exquisitely expressed in the memorable correspondence before marriage; uniquely and with splendid art, in the poetry of both. To her friends, meantime, as the friendship budded and blossomed, Elizabeth, while

keeping her secret, did not refrain from conveying her admiration for her poet acquaintance, and her joy in knowing him. As we read her early correspondence and catch the name of Browning again and again, we seem to hear the footstep of fate: we are, as the later Kenyon says, "like the spectators at a Greek tragedy who watch the development of a drama of which the dénouement is already known to them."

Early in her year of miracle, 1845, she writes to Mrs. Martin: "I had a letter from Browning the poet last night, which threw me into ecstasies—Browning, the author of 'Paracelsus,' and king of the mystics"; and once more: "I am getting deeper and deeperinto correspondence with Robert Browning, poet and

mystic, and we are growing to be the truest of friends." To Mr. Westwood, in April, 1845, she expresses her delight in his appreciation of this poet's "high power-very high, according to my view-very high, and various." In May she writes to an acquaintance in America that Mr. Browning "is a poet for posterity. I have a full faith in him as poet and prophet." To Poe she writes: "Our great poet, Mr. Browning, is enthusiastic in his admiration of the rhythm" of "The Raven."1 To Mr. Westwood, again, she writes, asking him to tell her honestly if he discovers in her "anything like the Sphinxineness of Browning." As for Browning, she says, "the fault is certainly great," but she finds that "the depth and

¹ John H. Ingram's Life of Mrs. Browning.

power of the significance (when it is apprehended) glorifies the puzzle." In May of this year she returns to the inescapable subject in writing to Mr. Westwood, telling him that when he has read "Sordello" he must "read for relaxation and recompense . . . 'Colombe's Birthday,' which is exquisite," though it is "Pippa Passes" that she "kneels to with deepest reverence." Later she praises, to Mrs. Martin, Landor's verses to him whom she calls "my friend and England's poet, Mr. Browning." Early in 1846 she tells Mrs. Martin that a friend, "one of the greatest poets in England, too," has brought her flowers.

Elizabeth Barrett's lovepoems can now be read in the light of her love-letters, with which they exquisitely interblend. These love-letters give her chief prose version of their courtship. But there is a letter of hers to Mrs. Martin, written from Pisa in October of 1846, which with great explicitness and moving eloquence reviews the circumstances of her acquaintance with Browning, and of her marriage without the consent or knowledge of the strangest father in the annals of literature. Mr. Barrett's treatment of the three children who dared to marry, and above all of a daughter who was no less dutiful and affectionate than she was splendid and world-renowned in talents, was so astoundingly hard and unrelenting that one is appalled into reticence of censure, and into wondering contemplation of the psychological peculiarities that could bring about such hideously unpaternal conduct, -questioning, as one must, whether it could have been this gross stubbornness in him that turned to mental and moral force in the frail and wonderful being who was his child. The marriage took place on September 12, 1846. They flew at once to that "warm climate" which had been wisely prescribed for Elizabeth, but which her father had forbidden her, and where comparatively good health and undreamed-of happiness awaited her.

But the whole story is compassed, in brief, in this one letter to Mrs. Martin: how she had been, after what broke her heart at Torquay,—her brother's death,—as dead as if she had her face against a grave; how five years before Mr. Kenyon had wished to bring Robert Browning to see her, but she had refused, in her blind dislike to seeing strangers; how, after

the publication of her last volumes, he wrote to her; how their correspondence led to her agreeing to see him as she never had received any other man. He wrote, she said, the most exquisite letters possible, having a way of putting things, and she consented - against her will. Then began his attachment, "infatuation call it," resisting the various denials which were her plain duty at the beginning, and persisting past them all. She began, she said, with a grave assurance that she was in an exceptional position, and saw him just in consequence of it, and that he must not recur to "that subject." He was for a while silent, but meantime the letters and the visits "rained down more and more." She tried to show him he was throwing into the ashes his best affections:

but he said he loved her, and should, to his last hour. He would wait twenty years, if she pleased. He preferred to be allowed to sit only an hour a day at her side, to the fulfilment of the brightest dream that should exclude her, in any possible world. Then she tells how the doctor had said that all she needed was a "warm climate and air," and her father was no help to her in this. He was not in favor of Italy; his attitude "involved a disappointment in the affections." She tries, in her letter, to palliate the attitude of her father, and explains with pathetic elaboration why a secret marriage and a flight to Italy were necessary to her life and her happiness, as well as a measure due to her faithful and unselfish lover. Then comes the praise of their six happy weeks together, and,

above all, her praise of him of whom she says that "his genius and all but miraculous attainments are the least things in him, the moral nature being of the very noblest, as all who ever knew him admit."

Elizabeth Barrett's chief poetic version of this courtship has long been known to the world in her so-called "Sonnets from the Portuguese," of which it has been said that they are "the most beautiful lovepoems ever written by woman to man," 1 and that they are "unequalled by any English sonnet-series except Shakespeare's own." 2 Mrs. Ritchie says truly of these "Sonnets": "There is a quality in them which is beyond words; an echo from afar which belongs

Stedman

¹ A Selection from Mrs. Browning's Poems, by Heloise E. Hersey.

² Victorian Poets, by Edmund Clarence

to the highest human expression of feeling." The complete story of their composition, and of their revelation to him who was their inspiration, has only been put forth since the death of Robert Browning.

It was during their residence in Pisa, early in 1847, that Browning first saw the "Sonnets from the Portuguese," as the poet Edmund Gosse has told by authority of Browning himself.² "Their custom was,

¹ Dictionary of National Biography.

² Critical Kit-Kats, by Edmund Gosse. Mr. Gosse, by his paper on the Sonnets from the Portuguese, and in his account of Browning's Early Career, first published in the Century Magazine and reprinted in Robert Browning—Personalia, has placed all readers of the Brownings under permanent obligations. It is interesting to recall that this latter article was prepared for the Century Magazine with Browning's consent and coöperation, and that, opposed as was Browning to contribute to periodicals, he allowed two pieces of verse of his to appear in the Century—the lines written in Miss "Touch him ne'er so lightly" (the Century for November, 1882), and the Rawdon Brown sonnet, written at Mrs. Bronson's request

Mr. Browning said, to write alone, and not to show each other what they had written. This was a rule which he sometimes broke through, but she never. He had the habit of working in a down-stairs room, where their meals were spread, while Mrs. Browning studied in a room on the floor above. One day, early in 1847, their breakfast being over, Mrs. Browning went up-stairs, whileher husband stood at the window watching the street till the table should be cleared. He was presently aware of some one behind him, although the servant was gone. It was Mrs. Browning, who held him by the shoulder to prevent his turning to look at her, and

(the Century for February, 1884). Here also, after his death, were published Mrs. Bronson's two papers of recollections of the poet. Thus were continued the Brownings' traditional relations with America. See, also, The Brownings and America, by Elizabeth Porter Gould.

at the same time pushed a packet of papers into the pocket of his coat. She told him to read that, and to tear it up if he did not like it; and then she fled again to her own room." All this was in fulfilment of prophecy; for had she not said in her letter of July 22, 1846, as much as this about the "Sonnets": "You shall see some day at Pisa what I will not show you now. Does not Solomon say that 'there is a time to read what is written'? If he doesn't, he ought."

Browning, notwithstanding his intense love of privacy, took the right ground concerning these works of inimitable art. "I dared not reserve to myself," he said, "the finest sonnets written in any language since Shakespeare's." Mrs. Browning finally consented to their being printed, under Miss Mitford's

care, as "Sonnets | by | E. B. B. | Reading | Not for Publication | 1847," and in the edition of her poems brought out in 1850 they were actually published, with their present title, which was suggested by her husband. The author's suggestion had been "Sonnets translated from the Bosnian"; but Browning, who called the author of "Catarina to Camoens" his "own little Portuguese," named the title that prevailed.1

Every one of the forty-four "Sonnets from the Portuguese" follows the Italian method rather than the English or Shaksperian sonnet form. Within the form chosen they have an interesting mingling of reg-

¹ Professor Dowden speaks of "the unexpected and wonderful gift" of the Sonnets to her husband at Pisa, as "the highest evidence of his wife's powers as a poet." Robert Browning, by Edward Dowden.

ularity with irregularity. In only seven of the sonnets (Sonnets IV, VIII, XIII, XVI, XXVII, xxxv, and xLIII) is there a full pause at the end of the octave. Otherwise there is great regularity, the whole forty-four poems having the same scheme of rhymes, there being uniformly but two rhymes in the octave and two in the sestet (arranged thus: 1, 2, 2, 1; 1, 2, 2, 1; 3, 4, 3, 4, 3, 4). In the seven sonnets where there is a full pause at the end of the octave, six of these are true pauses, but in one (Sonnet XLIII) there are other pauses which break the effect of the octave. Again, in only three of these seven (Sonnets IV, XIII, and XLIII) are the quatrains of the octave marked. Speaking technically, then, Sonnets IV and XIII are the nearest perfection, though as poems they rank no

higher than others in the series. In this series, though there are such rhymes as "burn" and "scorn," "desert" and "heart," "south" and "truth," the writer has fortunately not ventured upon such extreme experiments in rhyming as earlier she conscientiously pursued. It may be further noted that in fourteen of her other group of forty-four sonnets, all in the Italian form, she rhymes differently in the sestet.

In the body of Mrs. Browning's poetry,—as artistic as it often is, and as lofty in spirit as it always is,—the judicious

¹ For a competent discussion of Mrs. Browning's earlier theory and practice in the matter of rhyme see Fernand Henry's Les Sonnets Portugais (1905), which contains the third French translation of the Sonnets from the Portuguese, along with a sympathetic life of the author and a just appreciation of her writings. M. Henry is struck, as must be all critical readers, by the fact that Mrs. Browning's prose—her published correspondence—is not marred by the faults apparent in much of her verse.

have again and again to grieve at a touch of incongruity, a strained note which vitiates the art. Even in these "Sonnets" that note is not absent; but it is rare here, and it is quickly forgotten in the rush of noble passion outpoured in tones seraphic.

No technical analysis can discover the elements of endless attraction and power of inspiration contained in these poems. It would seem as if the breaking down of the barrier between octave and sestet, in this case, was by instinctive and fortunate choice, and in accordance with the peculiar and individual flow of thought and diction. This thought and this diction are indeed intensely individual; they are tinctured with the artistic habit and the singular experience of this one woman, -an invalid, familiar with the thought

of death, and a scholarly and accomplished poet, -loved, as it seemed to her miraculously, by a strong man and a great poet. Her education and her life-history were different from other women's; her lover was infinitely different from other men. Nevertheless, these accidents of circumstance offer no interference to the universality of the appeal of her inspired song; and the lyric passion of these "Sonnets" will remain forever a unique, vital, and typical expression of the awakening and consecration of love in the heart of woman.

Indeed, these "Sonnets," in their profound vision, their flaming sincerity, the eloquence with which they express the utter self-abnegation no less than the self-assertion of genuine love, transcend the distinctions of sex and proclaim authentically not only the woman's part, but, also, that which is common, in the master passion, to both woman and man.

But the artistic language of her love-experience was not confined to this great poemseries. It was framed also in other exquisite and noble verse, namely, in the six poems, "Life and Love," "A Denial," "Proof and Disproof," "Question and Answer," "Inclusions," and "Insufficiency," which are printed in Mrs. Browning's works just before the "Sonnets from the Portuguese." 1

Her poem-series of "Casa Guidi Windows" gives us delightful glimpses of their common joy—in later, peaceful, married years—in those Italian scenes which were to each a passion:

¹ See the Coxhoe edition; also The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Mr. Gosse's Essay.

And Vallombrosa, we two went to see

Last June, beloved companion,—where sublime

The mountains live in holy families, And the slow pine woods ever climb and climb

Half up their breasts.

How oft, indeed, We 've sent our souls out from the

rigid north,
On bare white feet which would not

print nor bleed,
To climb the Alpine passes and look

forth,
Where booming low the Lombard

rivers lead ·
To gardens, vineyards, all a dream

is worth,—
Sights, thou and I, Love, have

seen afterward
From Tuscan Bellosguardo, wide
awake,

When, standing on the actual blessed sward

Where Galileo stood at nights to take
The vision of the stars, we have
found it hard.

Gazing upon the earth and heaven, to make

A choice of beauty.

It is extremely interesting to find not only that Browning did not know that his friend was constantly expressing her intimate thought of him in verse, but that he gave a reason for the fact that he did not express his own affection for her in poetic form. In the April of 1845, three weeks before their meeting, he wrote: "I think I will really write verse to you some day." And a year later, April 14, 1846, he says he will see her the next day, adding: will tell you many things, it seems to me now, but when I am with you they always float out of mind. The feelings must

remain unwritten—unsung too, I fear. I very often fancy that if I had never before resorted to that mode of expression, to singing,—poetry—now I should resort to it, discover it! Whereas now—my very use and experience of it deters me—if one phrase of mine should seem 'poetical' in Mrs. Procter's sense—a conscious exaggeration,—put in for effect! only seem, I say! So I dare not try yet—but one day!"

The above words are the very precursor and proem of "One

Word More":

What of Rafael's sonnets, Dante's picture?

This: no artist lives and loves, that longs not

Once, and only once, and for one only,

(Ah, the prize!) to find his love a language

Fit and fair and simple and sufficient—

Using nature that 's an art to others, Not, this one time, art that 's turned his nature.

Ay, of all the artists living, loving, None but would forego his proper dowry,-

Does he paint? he fain would write a poem, -

Does he write? he fain would paint a picture,

Put to proof art alien to the artist's, Once, and only once, and for one

only,

So to be the man and leave the artist, Gain the man's joy, miss the artist's sorrow.

I shall never, in the years remaining, Paint you pictures, no, nor carve you statues,

Make you music that should allexpress me;

So it seems: I stand on my attainment.

This of verse alone, one life allows me;

Verse and nothing else have I to give you.

Other heights in other lives, God willing:

All the gifts from all the heights, your own, Love!

So little need was there in their life together for expression in art of their feeling for each other that Browning's "one day" did not come till nine years after his letter of 1846 promising a poem to her. "One Word More" was written in September, 1855, at 13 Dorset Street, London, while Mr. and Mrs. Browning were staying there with Miss Browning. Professor Dowden says truly that "the year 1855 was a fortunate year for English poetry." The book of Browning's "Men and Women" was published in the autumn, with its "beautiful epilogue, addressed to E. B. B." A few months before had appeared Tennyson's "Maud." It was one memorable night during this autumn, by the way, that occurred the reading of the whole of "Maud" by its author, with the Brownings and Rossettis as audience, of which Dante Rossetti's sketch is a well-known relic. It will be remembered that the reading of "Maud" by the author was followed by "Fra Lippo Lippi"

read by Browning.

"One Word More" is the only poem written during his wife's lifetime that is openly addressed to her by Browning. How much of his wife, and of his experience as her lifelong lover, went into his poetry it would be impossible accurately to detect and measure. So elusive are the workings of the artist's mind, so replete with suggestions and analogies are the poet's dreams, so full of meaning within meaning may be the images and symbols of

¹ Mr. George Willis Cooke, in A Guide Book to the Poetic and Dramatic Works of Robert Browning, quotes from W. M. Rossetti's article in the Academy concerning certain inaccurate references of Browning to Dante in this poem.

poetry, it would be idle to endeavor to determine where invention ends, and exact description and autobiographical confession begin. Of this we may be sure, that the imagination of Browning was immeasurably enriched and deeply and permanently colored by his relation to his wife, and by her personality and her art, as in like manner was her imagination by him; and that in one poem, his longest, "The Ring and the Book," her influence was direct and dominating. As "One Word More" was the only poem publicly addressed to Mrs. Browning by her husband during her life, so the references to her in the Pacchiarotto "Epilogue," and in "The Ring and the Book" and the last three lines of "Prospice" seem to be the only open references to her in his poetry after her death.

As she referred directly to her husband in "Casa Guidi Windows," so there are minor references in his poems which point to his living wife, as in "By the Fireside":

I will speak now,
No longer watch you as you sit
Reading by fire-light, that great brow
And the spirit-small hand propping
it,
Mutely, my heart knows how—

When, if I think but deep enough, You are wont to answer, prompt as rhyme;

and in "The Guardian Angel, a Picture of Fano," where they had been together:

We were at Fano, and three times we went

To sit and see him in his chapel there,

And drink his beauty to our soul's content

-My angel with me too:

c xxxvii

Again in the last stanza:

My love is here.

William Sharp, in his "Life of Browning," says he has been told that "'Two in the Campagna' was as actually personal as 'The Guardian Angel," though "too universally true to be merely personal." "A Face," which has been thought to be, possibly, a portrait of Mrs. Browning, really describes Emily Patmore, daughter of the poet, Coventry Patmore.

The lyric, "My Star," has been held, according to the Riverside Edition, and other authorities, to refer pointedly

to the poet's wife:

MY STAR

All I know
Of a certain star
Is, it can throw
(Like the angled spar)

¹ Robert Browning, by Professor Dowden. xxxviii Now a dart of red,
Now a dart of blue;
Till my friends have said
They would fain see, too,

My star that dartles the red, and the blue!

Then it stops like a bird; like a flower, hangs furled:

They must solace themselves with the Saturn above it.

What matter to me if their star is a world?

Mine has opened its soul to me; therefore I love it.

On the question as to whether it is, in fact, Mrs. Browning who is here imaged I am permitted to quote from private letters of Miss Charlotte Porter, who says: "There is, I think, no 'absolutely authentic proof' that 'My Star' is addressed to Mrs. Browning. There is a tradition that it is. I have always found 'It is said' echoed as to 'My Star,' just as it is in the Riverside note and in notes preceding that. And it is so

long established a hearsay that I shall not be surprised if some one is found to say that 'Browning told me so.' As you know, the place given it by Browning in the 'Selected Poems,' first in Vol. I, may be significant; but, on the other hand, it appeared for the first time in 'Men and Women' (1855), without distinctive place, namely, thirteenth, between 'A Serenade' and 'Instans Tyrannus.' I think I must add that, personally, I do not believe, for 'exquisite reasons' of my own, that 'My Star' was written in any peculiar sense to Mrs. Browning, while I think scarcely any lovelyric he published after they met does not taste of her 'as the wine must taste of its own grapes.' There are things, like this, that are imaginatively dramatized out of-out and away from—some section of a mood inspired by her."

I must add that some who were close to Browning write to me from Italy that they do not think "My Star" referred to her, because he so often used it in deference to requests for autographs. That she was his "Star," in a sense, we have his own authority for saying—in his letter to her postmarked November 10,1845. "I believed," he says, "in your glorious genius and knew it for a true star from the moment I sawit; long before I had the blessing of knowing it was My star, with my fortune and futurity in it."1

But we must not be confused by resemblances. A poet friend of mine thinks the apparent acknowledgment of inferiority in the "star" of the poem precludes the belief that

¹ The capitals are Browning's.

the symbol is literally applicable to the poet's wife, though it may have been that the thought of her as a star had to do with

its origin.

The discussion as to this lyric has an interest outside of its immediate subject, and I am fortunately able to share with my readers a letter from another poet friend, Mr. Edmund Gosse, of date April 17, 1905. "I cannot," he says, "for a moment consent to believe that 'My Star' refers to E. B. B. What is the analysis of the symbol? Somebody or something is like spar-an object hiding in a dark place, absolutely invisible to the ordinary gazer, but flashing (to the poet, -who stands or moves at a particular angle -) 'now a dart of red, now a dart of blue.' The poet has discovered this 'star,' and has praised it so

loudly and so long that his friends cluster round and 'would fain see it too . . .' But he cannot show it. It is invisible to any eye but his, and they must solace themselves with the publicity of Saturn. All this is incompatible with the idea of E. B. B., who was a famous poet, extremely before the public, herself a 'Saturn' long before R. B. knew her.

"My own conviction," adds Mr. Gosse, "has always been that R. B. did not indicate a person at all by 'My Star.' I think he meant a certain peculiarly individual quality of beauty in verse, or something analogous. He was sure that it flashed its red and blue at him, was a bird to him and a flower, but he despaired (this is quite an early poem) of making his contemporaries see it. They must solace themselves

with Wordsworth, or with Tennyson, or with the famous and popular E. B. B., or with the recognized and hieratic forms of æsthetic beauty. Some years ago, I came across by accident a phrase of the French sculptor Préault. He said: 'L'art, c'est cette étoile: je la vois et vous ne la voyez pas.' Was not R. B. thinking of this? Préault was by a few years his senior. I have never made use of this, but I give it to you as (I think) important. That the Star had nothing whatever to do with E. B. B. I regard as absolutely certain."

Long after her death, in the first stanza of the "Epilogue" to the "Pacchiarotto" volume, we have these words:

[&]quot;The poets pour us wine—"
Said the dearest poet I ever knew,
Dearest and greatest and best to
me.

The personal note in "Prospice" is open and evident, as also are the references to his wife in "The Ring and the Book." As to "Prospice,"written in the autumn following his wife's death,—no nobler, more courageous trumpet-note of conviction and aspiration was ever uttered: no ambiguity here, no grotesquery of thought or phrase, nothing for commentator to clarify or explain. The height of feeling in Browning means the height of clear and adequate expression. The passage in "The Ring and the Book" beginning

O lyric Love, half angel and half bird,

is there in all the writings of Browning a strain of more satisfying and exalted beauty? If Keats should come again and a lover of Browning and of Keats should wish to convince at a stroke the bright revenant of the high genius and imagination of the later poet, what poem or passage would he be more likely to select? And how exquisitely fitting it is that this should be so! Is it too much to say that nothing endears Browning to his readers quite so strongly as this one lyric burst of celestial passion, spoken not dramatically, but with full and spontaneous personality? And here, too, is the fulfilment of prophecy! For in her letter to him of May 26, 1846, his future wife, while praising his dramatic art and saying that all are agreed that "there is none so great faculty as the dramatic," yet is conscious of wishing him "to take the other crown besides." She desires him, after having made "his own creatures speak in clear

human voices," to speak himself "out of that personality which God made, and with the voice which he tuned into such power and sweetness of speech." "With an inferior power," she pleads, "you might have taken yourself closer to the hearts and lives of men, and made yourself dearer, though being less great. Therefore I do want you to do this with your surpassing power. It will be so easy to you to speak, and so noble when spoken." Noble, indeed, are the poems in which he speaks thus straightforthly and without dramatic indirection, as in this "lyric Love" invocation, in "One Word More," in "Prospice," and (with many other poems) in his swan-song of the "Épilogue" to "Asolando"—this last a twin utterance to "Prospice,"

and a shout in the face of death.1

The "lyric Love" passage in "The Ring and the Book" recalls the poignant personal note in the invocation to Light at the beginning of the third book of "Paradise Lost." The lost and unreturning Light of the blind Milton, which, in his invocation, he desired should be replaced by the inward Celestial Light, and Browning's lost companion, "half angel and half bird," the benediction of whose spirit he rapturously craved—these are the occasions of the noblest passages in the chief poems of the early and the later bard.

The closing lines of "The Ring and the Book" take up the figure of the ring again,

¹ How characteristic that Browning's swan-song was a shout of defiance in the face of death, while Tennyson's (in Crossing the Bar) was one of his most musical chants.

from the first book, and recur to the personal note—the "lyric Love":

If the rough ore be rounded to a ring! Render all duty which good ring should do,

And failing grace, succeed in guardianship,—

Might mine but lie outside thine, Lyric Love,

Thy rare gold ring of verse (the poet praised)
Linking our England to his Italy.

This "ring of verse" was that referred to by the Italian poet Tommaseo in the inscription placed by the city of Florence on the walls of Casa Guidi, which in translation is: "Here wrote and died E. B. Browning, who... made with her golden verse a ring linking Italy to England." 1

But there is more of his lost

¹The Camberwell edition of Robert Browning; Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke, editors.

wife in "The Ring and the Book" than the direct references of the poet, as is shown by one of the most interesting passages of Mrs. Orr's "Life," where she gives her reasons for believing that Mrs. Browning's spiritual presence with the author was "more than a presiding memory of the heart; that it entered largely into the conception of Pompilia, and, so far as this depended on it, the character of the whole book."

A poet has said that "as for Browning's love for his wife, nothing more tender and chival-rous has ever been told of ideal lovers in an ideal romance. It is so beautiful a story that one often prefers it to the sweetest or loftiest poem that came from the lips of either." True; yet the lives of the two as poets make the story what it is.

William Sharp's Life of Browning.

Their lives, indeed, were poems, as Milton said poets' lives should be, and their poetry was their life, as Mrs. Browning said should also be true of poets. The world could spare neither the lives nor the poems, and especially would it be poor without those poems in which each sang of the other. Take these together, was there ever, in all the treasury of the world's literature, so angelical an antiphony of love, anthemed by the two radiant and immortal lovers themselves?

R. W. G.



SONNETS FROM THE PORTUGUESE



SONNETS FROM THE PORTUGUESE

Ι

I THOUGHT once how Theocritus had sung

Of the sweet years, the dear and wished-for years,

Who each one in a gracious hand appears

To bear a gift for mortals, old or young:

And, as I mused it in his antique tongue,

I saw, in gradual vision through my tears,

The sweet, sad years, the melancholy years, Those of my own life, who by turns had flung

A shadow across me. Straightway
I was 'ware,

So weeping, how a mystic Shape did move

Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair;

And a voice said in mastery, while I strove,—

"Guess now who holds thee?"—
"Death," I said. But, there,
The silver answer rang,—"Not
Death, but Love."

But only three in all God's universe Have heard this word thou hast said,—Himself, beside

Thee speaking, and me listening! and replied

One of us . . . that was God, . . . and laid the curse

So darkly on my eyelids, as to amerce

My sight from seeing thee,—that if I had died,

The deathweights, placed there, would have signified

Less absolute exclusion. "Nay" is worse

- From God than from all others, O my friend!
- Men could not part us with their worldly jars,
- Nor the seas change us, nor the tempests bend;
- Our hands would touch for all the mountain-bars:
- And, heaven being rolled between us at the end,
- We should but vow the faster for the stars.

UNLIKE are we, unlike, O princely Heart!

Unlike our uses and our destinies.

Our ministering two angels look surprise

On one another, as they strike athwart

Their wings in passing. Thou, bethink thee, art

A guest for queens to social pageantries,

With gages from a hundred brighter eyes

Than tears even can make mine, to play thy part

Of chief musician. What hast thou to do

With looking from the lattice-lights at me,

A poor, tired, wandering singer, singing through

The dark, and leaning up a cypress tree?

The chrism is on thine head,—on mine, the dew,—

And Death must dig the level where these agree.

- Thou hast thy calling to some palace-floor,
- Most gracious singer of high poems! where
- The dancers will break footing, from the care .
- Of watching up thy pregnant lips for more.
- And dost thou lift this house's latch too poor
- For hand of thine? and canst thou think and bear
- To let thy music drop here unaware

- In folds of golden fulness at my door?
- Look up and see the casement broken in,
- The bats and owlets builders in the roof!
- My cricket chirps against thy mandolin.
- Hush, call no echo up in further proof
- Of desolation! there 's a voice within
- That weeps . . . as thou must sing . . . alone, aloof.

I LIFT my heavy heart up solemnly, As once Electra her sepulchral urn, And, looking in thine eyes, I over-

The ashes at thy feet. Behold and see

What a great heap of grief lay hid in me,

And how the red wild sparkles dimly burn

Through the ashen greyness. If thy foot in scorn

Could tread them out to darkness utterly,

It might be well perhaps. But if instead

Thou wait beside me for the wind to blow

The grey dust up, . . . those laurels on thine head,

O my Belovëd, will not shield thee so,

That none of all the fires shall scorch and shred

The hair beneath. Stand farther off then! go.

Go from me. Yet I feel that I shall stand

Henceforward in thy shadow.

Nevermore

Alone upon the threshold of my door

Of individual life, I shall command
The uses of my soul, nor lift my
hand

Serenely in the sunshine as before, Without the sense of that which I forbore—

Thy touch upon the palm. The widest land

Doom takes to part us, leaves thy heart in mine

With pulses that beat double.
What I do

And what I dream include thee, as

Must taste of its own grapes. And when I sue

God for myself, He hears that name of thine,

And sees within my eyes the tears of two.

- THE face of all the world is changed,
 I think,
- Since first I heard the footsteps of thy soul
- Move still, oh, still, beside me, as they stole
- Betwixt me and the dreadful outer brink
- Of obvious death, where I, who thought to sink,
- Was caught up into love, and taught the whole
- Of life in a new rhythm. The cup of dole
- God gave for baptism, I am fain to drink,

And praise its sweetness, Sweet, with thee anear.

The names of country, heaven, are changed away

For where thou art or shalt be, there or here;

And this . . . this lute and song . . . loved yesterday,

(The singing angels know) are only dear

Because thy name moves right in what they say.

- What can I give thee back, O liberal
- And princely giver, who hast brought the gold
- And purple of thine heart, unstained, untold,
- And laid them on the outside of the wall
- For such as I to take or leave withal,
- In unexpected largesse? am I cold,
- Ungrateful, that for these most manifold
- High gifts, I render nothing back at all?

- Not so; not cold,—but very poor instead.
- Ask God who knows. For frequent tears have run
- The colours from my life, and left so dead
- And pale a stuff, it were not fitly done
- To give the same as pillow to thy head.
- Go farther! let it serve to trample on.

- Can it be right to give what I can give?
- To let thee sit beneath the fall of tears
- As salt as mine, and hear the sighing years
- Re-sighing on my lips renunciative
- Through those infrequent smiles which fail to live
- For all thy adjurations? O my fears,
- That this can scarce be right! We are not peers,
- So to be lovers; and I own, and grieve,

That givers of such gifts as mine are, must

Be counted with the ungenerous.
Out, alas!

I will not soil thy purple with my dust,

Nor breathe my poison on thy Venice-glass,

Nor give thee any love—which were unjust.

Beloved, I only love thee! let it pass.

- YET, love, mere love, is beautiful indeed
- And worthy of acceptation. Fire is bright,
- Let temple burn, or flax; an equal light
- Leaps in the flame from cedarplank or weed:
- And love is fire. And when I say at need
- I love thee . . . mark! . . . I love thee—in thy sight
- I stand transfigured, glorified aright,
- With conscience of the new rays that proceed

Out of my face toward thine.
There 's nothing low

In love, when love the lowest:
meanest creatures

Who love God, God accepts while loving so.

And what I *feel*, across the inferior features

Of what I am, doth flash itself, and show

How that great work of Love enhances Nature's.

- And therefore if to love can be desert,
- I am not all unworthy. Cheeks as pale
- As these you see, and trembling knees that fail
- To bear the burden of a heavy heart,—
- This weary minstrel-life that once was girt
- To climb Aornus, and can scarce avail
- To pipe now 'gainst the valley nightingale
- A melancholy music,—why advert

To these things? O Belovëd, it is plain

I am not of thy worth nor for thy place!

And yet, because I love thee, I

From that same love this vindicating grace,

To live on still in love, and yet in vain,—

To bless thee, yet renounce thee to thy face.

- INDEED this very love which is my boast,
- And which, when rising up from breast to brow,
- Doth crown me with a ruby large enow
- To draw men's eyes and prove the inner cost,—
- This love even, all my worth, to the uttermost,
- I should not love withal, unless that thou
- Hadst set me an example, shown me how,
- When first thine earnest eyes with mine were crossed,

And love called love. And thus, I cannot speak

Of love even, as a good thing of my own:

Thy soul hath snatched up mine all faint and weak,

And placed it by thee on a golden throne,—

And that I love (O soul, we must be meek!)

Is by thee only, whom I love alone.

- And wilt thou have me fashion into speech
- The love I bear thee, finding words enough,
- And hold the torch out, while the winds are rough,
- Between our faces, to cast light on each?—
- I drop it at thy feet. I cannot teach
- My hand to hold my spirit so far off
- From myself—me—that I should bring thee proof
- In words, of love hid in me out of reach.

Nay, let the silence of my womanhood

Commend my woman-love to thy belief,—

Seeing that I stand unwon, however wooed,

And rend the garment of my life, in brief,

By a most dauntless, voiceless fortitude,

Lest one touch of this heart convey its grief.

- IF thou must love me, let it be for nought
- Except for love's sake only. Do not say
- "I love her for her smile—her look
 —her way
 - Of speaking gently,—for a trick of thought
 - That falls in well with mine, and certes brought
 - A sense of pleasant ease on such a day"—
 - For these things in themselves, Belovëd, may
 - Be changed, or change for thee,—and love, so wrought,

May be unwrought so. Neither love me for

Thine own dear pity's wiping my cheeks dry,—

A creature might forget to weep, who bore

Thy comfort long, and lose thy love thereby!

But love me for love's sake, that evermore

Thou may'st love on, through love's eternity.

- Accuse me not, beseech thee, that I wear
- Too calm and sad a face in front of thine;
- For we two look two ways, and cannot shine
- With the same sunlight on our brow and hair.
- On me thou lookest with no doubting care,
- As on a bee shut in a crystalline;
- Since sorrow hath shut me safe in love's divine,
- And to spread wing and fly in the outer air

Were most impossible failure, if I strove

To fail so. But I look on thee—
on thee—

Beholding, besides love, the end of love,

Hearing oblivion beyond memory; As one who sits and gazes from

above,

Over the rivers to the bitter sea.

- And yet, because thou overcomest so,
- Because thou art more noble and like a king,
- Thou canst prevail against my fears and fling
- Thy purple round me, till my heart shall grow
- Too close against thine heart henceforth to know
- How it shook when alone. Why, conquering
- May prove as lordly and complete a thing
- In lifting upward, as in crushing low!

And as a vanquished soldier yields his sword

To one who lifts him from the bloody earth,

Even so, Belovëd, I at last record, Here ends my strife. If *thou* invite me forth,

I rise above abasement at the word.

Make thy love larger to enlarge my worth.

XVII

- My poet, thou canst touch on all the notes
- God set between His After and Before,
- And strike up and strike off the general roar
- Of the rushing worlds a melody that floats
- In a serene air purely. Antidotes Of medicated music, answering for
- Mankind's forlornest uses, thou canst pour
- From thence into their ears. God's will devotes

Thine to such ends, and mine to wait on thine.

How, Dearest, wilt thou have me for most use?

A hope, to sing by gladly? or a fine

Sad memory, with thy songs to interfuse?

A shade, in which to sing—of palm or pine?

A grave, on which to rest from singing? Choose.

XVIII

I NEVER gave a lock of hair away To a man, Dearest, except this to thee,

Which now upon my fingers thoughtfully,

I ring out to the full brown length and say

"Take it." My day of youth went yesterday;

My hair no longer bounds to my foot's glee,

Nor plant I it from rose or myrtletree,

As girls do, any more: it only may

Now shade on two pale cheeks the mark of tears,

Taught drooping from the head that hangs aside

Through sorrow's trick. I thought the funeral-shears

Would take this first, but Love is justified,—

Take it thou,—finding pure, from all those years,

The kiss my mother left here when she died.

- THE soul's Rialto hath its merchandise:
- I barter curl for curl upon that mart,
- And from my poet's forehead to my heart
- Receive this lock which outweighs argosies,—
- As purply black, as erst to Pindar's eyes
- The dim purpureal tresses gloomed athwart
- The nine white Muse-brows. For this counterpart, . . .
- The bay-crown's shade, Belovëd, I surmise,

- Still lingers on thy curl, it is so black!
- Thus, with a fillet of smooth-kissing breath,
- I tie the shadows safe from gliding back,
- And lay the gift where nothing hindereth;
- Here on my heart, as on thy brow, to lack
- No natural heat till mine grows cold in death.

- BELOVED, my Beloved, when I think
- That thou wast in the world a year ago,
- What time I sat alone here in the snow
- And saw no footprint, heard the silence sink
- No moment at thy voice, but, link by link,
- Went counting all my chains as if that so
- They never could fall off at any blow
- Struck by thy possible hand,—why, thus I drink

Of life's great cup of wonder! Wonderful,

Never to feel thee thrill the day or night

With personal act or speech,—nor ever cull

Some prescience of thee with the blossoms white

Thou sawest growing! Atheists are as dull,

Who cannot guess God's presence out of sight.

- SAY over again, and yet once over again,
- That thou dost love me. Though the word repeated
- Should seem "a cuckoo-song," as thou dost treat it,
- Remember, never to the hill or plain,
- Valley and wood, without her cuckoo-strain
- Comes the fresh Spring in all her green completed.
- Belovëd, I, amid the darkness greeted
- By a doubtful spirit-voice, in that doubt's pain

Cry, "Speak once more—thou lovest!" Who can fear

Too many stars, though each in heaven shall roll,

Too many flowers, though each shall crown the year?

Say thou dost love me, love me, love me—toll

The silver iterance!—only minding, Dear,

To love me also in silence with thy soul.

- When our two souls stand up erect and strong,
- Face to face, silent, drawing nigh and nigher,
- Until the lengthening wings break into fire
- At either curved point,—what bitter wrong
- Can the earth do to us, that we should not long
- Be here contented? Think. In mounting higher,
- The angels would press on us and aspire
- To drop some golden orb of perfect song

Into our deep, dear silence. Let us stay

Rather on earth, Belovëd,—where the unfit

Contrarious moods of men recoil away

And isolate pure spirits, and permit A place to stand and love in for a

day,

With darkness and the death-hour rounding it.

HIXX

- Is it indeed so? If I lay here dead,
- Wouldst thou miss any life in losing mine?
- And would the sun for thee more coldly shine
- Because of grave-damps falling round my head?
- I marvelled, my Belovëd, when I read
- Thy thought so in the letter. I am
- But . . . so much to thee? Can I pour thy wine
- While my hands tremble? Then my soul, instead

Of dreams of death, resumes life's lower range.

Then, love me, Love! Look on me—breathe on me!

As brighter ladies do not count it strange,

For love, to give up acres and degree,

I yield the grave for thy sake, and exchange

My near sweet view of Heaven, for earth with thee!

XXIV

LET the world's sharpness, like a clasping knife,

Shut in upon itself and do no harm In this close hand of Love, now soft and warm,

And let us hear no sound of human strife

After the click of the shutting.

Life to life—

I lean upon thee, Dear, without alarm,

And feel as safe as guarded by a charm

Against the stab of worldlings, who if rife

Are weak to injure. Very whitely still

The lilies of our lives may reassure
Their blossoms from their roots,
accessible

Alone to heavenly dews that drop not fewer;

Growing straight, out of man's reach, on the hill.

God only, who made us rich, can make us poor.

- A HEAVY heart, Belovëd, have I borne
- From year to year until I saw thy face,
- And sorrow after sorrow took the place
- Of all those natural joys as lightly worn
- As the stringed pearls, each lifted in its turn
- By a beating heart at dance-time. Hopes apace
- Were changed to long despairs, till God's own grace
- Could scarcely lift above the world forlorn

My heavy heart. Then thou didst bid me bring

And let it drop adown thy calmly great

Deep being! Fast it sinketh, as a thing

Which its own nature doth precipitate,

While thine doth close above it, mediating

Betwixt the stars and the unaccomplished fate.

- I LIVED with visions for my company
- Instead of men and women, years ago,
- And found them gentle mates, nor thought to know
- A sweeter music than they played to me.
- But soon their trailing purple was not free
- Of this world's dust, their lutes did silent grow,
- And I myself grew faint and blind below
- Their vanishing eyes. Then THOU didst come—to be,

Belovëd, what they seemed. Their shining fronts,

Their songs, their splendours (better, yet the same,

As river-water hallowed into fonts),

Met in thee, and from out thee overcame

My soul with satisfaction of all wants:

Because God's gifts put man's best dreams to shame.

XXVII

- My own Belovëd, who hast lifted me
- From this drear flat of earth where I was thrown,
- And, in betwixt the languid ringlets, blown
- A life-breath, till the forehead hopefully
- Shines out again, as all the angels see,
- Before thy saving kiss! My own, my own,
- Who camest to me when the world was gone,
- And I who looked for only God, found thee!

I find thee; I am safe, and strong, and glad.

As one who stands in dewless asphodel

Looks backward on the tedious time he had

In the upper life,—so I, with bosom-swell,

Make witness, here, between the good and bad,

That Love, as strong as Death, retrieves as well.

XXVIII

- My letters! all dead paper, mute and white!
- And yet they seem alive and quivering
- Against my tremulous hands which loose the string
- And let them drop down on my knee to-night,
- This said,—he wished to have me in his sight
- Once, as a friend: this fixed a day in spring
- To come and touch my hand . . . a simple thing,
- Yet I wept for it!—this, . . . the paper 's light . . .

Said, Dear, I love thee; and I sank and quailed

As if God's future thundered on my past.

This said, *I am thine*—and so its ink has paled

With lying at my heart that beat too fast.

And this . . . O Love, thy words have ill availed

If, what this said, I dared repeat at last!

- I THINK of thee! —my thoughts do twine and bud
- About thee, as wild vines, about a tree,
- Put out broad leaves, and soon there 's nought to see
- Except the straggling green which hides the wood.
- Yet, O my palm-tree, be it understood
- I will not have my thoughts instead of thee
- Who art dearer, better! Rather, instantly
- Renew thy presence; as a strong tree should,

Rustle thy boughs and set thy trunk all bare,

And let these bands of greenery which insphere thee

Drop heavily down,—burst, shattered, everywhere!

Because, in this deep joy to see and hear thee

And breathe within thy shadow a new air,

I do not think of thee—I am too near thee.

- I see thine image through my tears to-night,
- And yet to-day I saw thee smiling. How
- Refer the cause?—Belovëd, is it thou
- Or I, who makes me sad? The acolyte
- Amid the chanted joy and thankful rite
- May so fall flat, with pale insensate brow
- On the altar-stair. I hear thy voice and vow,
- Perplexed, uncertain, since thou art out of sight,

As he, in his swooning ears, the choir's amen.

Belovëd, dost thou love? or did I see all

The glory as I dreamed, and fainted when

Too vehement light dilated my ideal,

For my soul's eyes? Will that light come again,

As now these tears come—falling hot and real?

- Thou comest! all is said without a word.
- I sit beneath thy looks, as children do
- In the noon-sun, with souls that tremble through
- Their happy eyelids from an unaverred
- Yet prodigal inward joy. Behold, I erred
- In that last doubt! and yet I cannot rue
- The sin most, but the occasion—that we two
- Should for a moment stand unministered

By a mutual presence. Ah, keep near and close,

Thou dovelike help! and, when my fears would rise,

With thy broad heart serenely interpose:

Brood down with thy divine sufficiencies

These thoughts which tremble when bereft of those,

Like callow birds left desert to the skies.

IIXXX

- THE first time that the sun rose on thine oath
- To love me, I looked forward to the moon
- To slacken all those bonds which seemed too soon
- And quickly tied to make a lasting troth.
- Quick-loving hearts, I thought, may quickly loathe;
- And, looking on myself, I seemed not one
- For such man's love! more like an out-of-tune
- Worn viol, a good singer would be wroth

5

- To spoil his song with, and which, snatched in haste,
- Is laid down at the first ill-sounding note.
- I did not wrong myself so, but I placed
- A wrong on *thee*. For perfect strains may float
- 'Neath master-hands, from instruments defaced,—
- And great souls, at one stroke, may do and doat.

XXXIII

- YES, call me by my pet-name! let me hear
- The name I used to run at, when a child,
- From innocent play, and leave the cowslips piled,
- To glance up in some face that proved me dear
- With the look of its eyes. I miss the clear
- Fond voices which, being drawn and reconciled
- Into the music of Heaven's undefiled,
- Call me no longer. Silence on the bier,

While I call God—call God!—So let thy mouth

Be heir to those who are now examimate.

Gather the north flowers to complete the south,

And catch the early love up in the late.

Yes, call me by that name,—and I, in truth,

With the same heart, will answer and not wait.

- WITH the same heart, I said, I 'll answer thee
- As those, when thou shalt call me by my name—
- Lo, the vain promise! is the same, the same,
- Perplexed and ruffled by life's strategy?
- When called before, I told how hastily
- I dropped my flowers or brake off from a game,
- To run and answer with the smile that came
- At play last moment, and went on with me

- Through my obedience. When I answer now,
- I drop a grave thought, break from solitude;
- Yet still my heart goes to thee ponder how—
- Not as to a single good, but all my good!
- Lay thy hand on it, best one, and allow
- That no child's foot could run fast as this blood.

- IF I leave all for thee, wilt thou exchange
- And be all to me? Shall I never miss
- Home-talk and blessing and the common kiss
- That comes to each in turn, nor count it strange,
- When I look up, to drop on a new range
- Of walls and floors, another home than this?
- Nay, wilt thou fill that place by me which is
- Filled by dead eyes too tender to know change?

That 's hardest. If to conquer love, has tried,

To conquer grief, tries more, as all things prove;

For grief indeed is love and grief beside.

Alas, I have grieved so I am hard to love.

Yet love me—wilt thou? Open thine heart wide,

And fold within the wet wings of thy dove.

- When we met first and loved, I did not build
- Upon the event with marble. Could it mean
- To last, a love set pendulous between
- Sorrow and sorrow? Nay, I rather thrilled,
- Distrusting every light that seemed to gild
- The onward path, and feared to overlean
- A finger even. And, though I have grown serene
- And strong since then, I think that God has willed

- A still renewable fear . . . O love, O troth . . .
- Lest these enclaspëd hands should never hold,
- This mutual kiss drop down between us both
- As an unowned thing, once the lips being cold.
- And Love, be false! if he, to keep one oath.
- Must lose one joy, by his life's star foretold.

XXXVII

Pardon, oh, pardon, that my soul should make,

Of all that strong divineness which I know

For thine and thee, an image only so

Formed of the sand, and fit to shift and break.

It is that distant years which did not take

Thy sovranty, recoiling with a blow, Have forced my swimming brain to undergo

Their doubt and dread, and blindly to forsake

Thy purity of likeness and distort
Thy worthiest love to a worthless
counterfeit:

As if a shipwrecked Pagan, safe in port,

His guardian sea-god to commemorate,

Should set a sculptured porpoise, gills a-snort

And vibrant tail, within the templegate.

XXXVIII

- First time he kissed me, he but only kissed
- The fingers of this hand wherewith I write;
- And ever since, it grew more clean and white,
- Slow to world-greetings, quick with its "Oh, list,"
- When the angels speak. A ring of amethyst
- I could not wear here, plainer to my sight,
- Than that first kiss. The second passed in height
- The first, and sought the forehead, and half missed,

Half falling on the hair. O beyond meed!

That was the chrism of love, which love's own crown,

With sanctifying sweetness, did precede.

The third upon my lips was folded down

In perfect, purple state; since when, indeed,

I have been proud and said, "My love, my own."

36

XXXIX

- BECAUSE thou hast the power and own'st the grace
- To look through and behind this mask of me
- (Against which years have beat thus blanchingly
- With their rains), and behold my soul's true face,
- The dim and weary witness of life's race,—
- Because thou hast the faith and love to see,
- Through that same soul's distracting lethargy,
- The patient angel waiting for a place

In the new Heavens,—because nor sin nor woe,

Nor God's infliction, nor death's neighbourhood,

Nor all which others viewing, turn to go,

Nor all which makes me tired of all, self-viewed,—

Nothing repels thee, . . . Dearest, teach me so

To pour out gratitude, as thou dost, good!

- Oн, yes! they love through all this world of ours!
- I will not gainsay love, called love forsooth.
- I have heard love talked in my early youth,
- And since, not so long back but that the flowers
- Then gathered, smell still. Mussulmans and Giaours
- Throw kerchiefs at a smile, and have no ruth
- For any weeping. Polypheme's white tooth
- Slips on the nut if, after frequent showers,

3

The shell is over-smooth,—and not so much

Will turn the thing called love, aside to hate

Or else to oblivion. But thou art not such

A lover, my Belovëd! thou canst wait

Through sorrow and sickness, to bring souls to touch,

And think it soon when others cry
"Too late."

- I THANK all who have loved me in their hearts,
- With thanks and love from mine.

 Deep thanks to all
- Who paused a little near the prisonwall
- To hear my music in its louder parts
- Ere they went onward, each one to the mart's
- Or temple's occupation, beyond call.
- But thou, who, in my voice's sink and fall
- When the sob took it, thy divinest Art's

Own instrument didst drop down at thy foot

To hearken what I said between my tears, . . .

Instruct me how to thank thee!

Oh, to shoot

My soul's full meaning into future years,

That *they* should lend it utterance, and salute

Love that endures, from Life that disappears!

- "My future will not copy fair my past"—
 - I wrote that once; and thinking at my side
 - My ministering life-angel justified
 - The word by his appealing look upcast
 - To the white throne of God, I turned at last,
 - And there, instead, saw thee, not unallied
 - To angels in thy soul! Then I, long tried
 - By natural ills, received the comfort fast,

While budding, at thy sight, my pilgrim's staff

Gave out green leaves with morning dews impearled.

I seek no copy now of life's first half:

Leave here the pages with long musing curled,

And write me new my future's epigraph,

New angel mine, unhoped for in the world!

- How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
- I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
- My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
- For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.
- I love thee to the level of everyday's Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
- I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
- I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.

- I love thee with the passion put to use
- In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
- I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
- With my lost saints,—I love thee with the breath,
- Smiles, tears, of all my life!—and, if God choose,
- I shall but love thee better after death.

- Beloved, thou hast brought me many flowers
- Plucked in the garden, all the summer through
- And winter, and it seemed as if they grew
- In this close room, nor missed the sun and showers.
- So, in the like name of that love of ours,
- Take back these thoughts which here unfolded too,
- And which on warm and cold days
 I withdrew
- From my heart's ground. Indeed, those beds and bowers

Be overgrown with bitter weeds and rue,

And wait thy weeding; yet here 's eglantine,

Here's ivy!—take them, as I used to do

Thy flowers, and keep them where they shall not pine.

Instruct thine eyes to keep their colours true,

And tell thy soul, their roots are left in mine.





LIFE AND LOVE

I

Fast this Life of mine was dying, Blind already and calm as death,

Snowflakes on her bosom lying Scarcely heaving with her breath.

H

Love came by, and having known her

In a dream of fabled lands, Gently stooped, and laid upon her Mystic chrism of holy hands; Drew his smile across her folded Eyelids, as the swallow dips; Breathed as finely as the cold did, Through the locking of her lips.

ıv

So, when Life looked upward, being

Warmed and breathed on from above,

What sight could she have for seeing,

Evermore . . . but only Love?

A DENIAL

ī

WE have met late — it is too late to meet,

O friend, not more than friend! Death's forecome shroud is tangled round my feet,

And if I step or stir, I touch the

In this last jeopardy

Can I approach thee, I, who cannot move?

How shall I answer thy request for love?

Look in my face and see.

I love thee not, I dare not love thee! go

In silence; drop my hand. If thou seek roses, seek them

where they blow

In garden-alleys, not in desert-sand. Can life and death agree,

That thou shouldst stoop thy song to my complaint?

I cannot love thee. If the word is faint,

Look in my face and see.

III

I might have loved thee in some former days.

Oh, then, my spirits had leapt As now they sink, at hearing thy love-praise!

Before these faded cheeks were overwept,

Had this been asked of me, To love thee with my whole strong heart and head,-

I should have said still . . . yes, but *smiled* and said, "Look in my face and see!"

IV

But now ... God sees me, God, who took my heart And drowned it in life's surge.

In all your wide warm earth I have no part-

A light song overcomes me like a dirge.

Could Love's great harmony The saints keep step to when their bonds are loose,

Not weigh me down? am I a wife to choose? Look in my face and see-

7

While I behold, as plain as one who dreams,

Some woman of full worth, Whose voice, as cadenced as a silver stream's,

Shall prove the fountain-soul which sends it forth;

One younger, more thought-free And fair and gay, than I, thou must forget,

With brighter eyes than these ... which are not wet ...

Look in my face and see!

VI

So farewell thou, whom I have known too late

To let thee come so near.

Be counted happy while men call thee great,

And one belovëd woman feels thee dear! —

Not I! —that cannot be.

I am lost, I am changed,—I must go farther, where

The change shall take me worse, and no one dare

Look in my face and see.

VII

Meantime I bless thee. By these thoughts of mine

I bless thee from all such!

I bless thy lamp to oil, thy cup to wine,

Thy hearth to joy, thy hand to an equal touch

Of loyal troth. For me,

I love thee not, I love thee not! — away!

Here 's no more courage in my soul to say

"Look in my face and see."

PROOF AND DISPROOF

I

Dost thou love me, my Belovëd?
Who shall answer yes or no?
What is provëd or disprovëd
When my soul inquireth so,
Dost thou love me, my Belovëd?

II

I have seen thy heart to-day,
Never open to the crowd,
While to love me aye and aye
Was the vow as it was vowed
By thine eyes of steadfast grey.

Now I sit alone, alone—
And the hot tears break and burn.
Now, Belovëd, thou art gone,
Doubt and terror have their turn.
Is it love that I have known?

IV

I have known some bitter things,—
Anguish, anger, solitude.

Year by year an evil brings,
Year by year denies a good;

V

March winds violate my springs.

I have known how sickness bends,
I have known how sorrow
breaks,—

How quick hopes have sudden ends, How the heart thinks till it aches Of the smile of buried friends. Last, I have known *thee*, my brave
Noble thinker, lover, doer!
The best knowledge last I have.
But thou comest as the thrower
Of fresh flowers upon a grave.

VII

Count what feelings used to move me!

Can this love assort with those?
Thou, who art so far above me,
Wilt thou stoop so, for repose?
Is it true that thou canst love me?

VIII

Do not blame me if I doubt thee.
I can call love by its name
When thine arm is wrapt about me;
But even love seems not the same,
When I sit alone, without thee.

In thy clear eyes I descried

Many a proof of love, to-day;
But to-night, those unbelied

Speechful eyes being gone away,
There's the proof to seek beside.

There 's the proof to seek, beside.

Х

Dost thou love me, my Belovëd? Only *thou* canst answer yes! And, thou gone, the proof 's disproved,

And the cry rings answerless— Dost thou love me, my Belovëd?

QUESTION AND ANSWER

ī

Love you seek for, presupposes
Summer heat and sunny glow.
Tell me, do you find moss-roses
Budding, blooming in the snow?
Snow might kill the rose-tree's
root—

Shake it quickly from your foot, Lest it harm you as you go.

11

From the ivy where it dapples
A grey ruin, stone by stone,
Do you look for grapes or apples,
Or for sad green leaves alone?
Pluck the leaves off, two or three—
Keep them for morality
When you shall be safe and gone.

INCLUSIONS

Ι

Oн, wilt thou have my hand, Dear, to lie along in thine?

As a little stone in a running stream, it seems to lie and pine.

Now drop the poor pale hand, Dear, unfit to plight with thine.

H

Oh, wilt thou have my cheek, Dear, drawn closer to thine own?

My cheek is white, my cheek is worn, by many a tear run down.

Now leave a little space, Dear, lest it should wet thine own.

Oh, must thou have my soul, Dear, commingled with thy soul?—

Red grows the cheek, and warm the hand; the part is in the whole:

Nor hands nor cheeks keep separate, when soul is joined to soul.

INSUFFICIENCY

I

THERE is no one beside thee and no one above thee,

Thou standest alone as the nightingale sings!

And my words that would praise thee are impotent things,

For none can express thee though all should approve thee.

I love thee so, Dear, that I only can love thee.

Say, what can I do for thee? weary thee, grieve thee?

Lean on thy shoulder, new burdens to add?

Weep my tears over thee, making thee sad?

Oh, hold me not—love me not! let me retrieve thee.

I love thee so, Dear, that I only can leave thee.





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ONE WORD MORE PROSPICE "O LYRIC LOVE"

BY ROBERT BROWNING





ONE WORD MORE

To E. B. B.

London, September, 1855

Ι

There they are, my fifty men and women

Naming me the fifty poems finished! Take them, Love, the book and me together:

Where the heart lies, let the brain lie also.

H

Rafael made a century of sonnets,
Made and wrote them in a certain
volume

Dinted with the silver-pointed pencil

Else he only used to draw Madonnas:

These, the world might view—but one, the volume.

Who that one, you ask? Your heart instructs you.

Did she live and love it all her lifetime?

Did she drop, his lady of the sonnets,

Die, and let it drop beside her pillow

Where it lay in place of Rafael's glory,

Rafael's cheek so duteous and so loving—

Cheek, the world was wont to hail a painter's,

Rafael's cheek, her love had turned a poet's?

You and I would rather read that volume,

(Taken to his beating bosom by it) Lean and list the bosom-beats of Rafael,

Would we not? than wonder at Madonnas—

Her, San Sisto names, and Her, Foligno,

Her, that visits Florence in a vision, Her, that 's left with lilies in the Louvre—

Seen by us and all the world in circle.

IV

You and I will never read that volume.

Guido Reni, like his own eye's apple

Guarded long the treasure-book and loved it.

Guido Reni dying, all Bologna Cried, and the world cried too, "Ours, the treasure!"

Suddenly, as rare things will, it vanished.

v

Dante once prepared to paint an angel:

Whom to please? You whisper "Beatrice."

While he mused and traced it and retraced it,

(Peradventure with a pen corroded Still by drops of that hot ink he dipped for,

When, his left-hand i' the hair o' the wicked,

Back he held the brow and pricked its stigma,

- Bit into the live man's flesh for parchment,
- Loosed him, laughed to see the writing rankle,
- Let the wretch go festering through Florence)—
- Dante, who loved well because he hated,
- Hated wickedness that hinders loving,
- Dante standing, studying his angel,—
- In there broke the folk of his Inferno.
- Says he—" Certain people of importance"
- (Such he gave his daily dreadful line to)
- "Entered and would seize, forsooth, the poet."
 - Says the poet—"Then I stopped my painting."

You and I would rather see that angel,

Painted by the tenderness of Dante,

Would we not ?—than read a fresh Inferno.

VII

You and I will never see that pic-

While he mused on love and Beatrice,

While he softened o'er his outlined angel,

In they broke, those "people of importance:"

We and Bice bear the loss forever.

VIII

What of Rafael's sonnets, Dante's picture?

- This: no artist lives and loves, that longs not
- Once, and only once, and for one only,
- (Ah, the prize!) to find his love a language
- Fit and fair and simple and sufficient—
- Using nature that 's an art to others,
- Not, this one time, art that 's turned his nature.
- Ay, of all the artists living, loving, None but would forego his proper dowry,—
- Does he paint? he fain would write a poem,—
- Does he write? he fain would paint a picture,
- Put to proof art alien to the artist's, Once, and only once, and for one only,

So to be the man and leave the artist,

Gain the man's joy, miss the artist's sorrow.

IX

Wherefore? Heaven's gift takes earth's abatement!

He who smites the rock and spreads the water,

Bidding drink and live a crowd beneath him,

Even he, the minute makes immortal,

Proves, perchance, but mortal in the minute,

Desecrates, belike, the deed in doing.

While he smites, how can he but remember,

So he smote before, in such a peril,

- When they stood and mocked—
 "Shall smiting help us?"
- When they drank and sneered—
 "A stroke is easy!"
- When they wiped their mouths and went their journey,
- Throwing him for thanks—" But drought was pleasant."
 - Thus old memories mar the actual triumph;
- Thus the doing savours of disrelish;
- Thus achievement lacks a gracious somewhat;
- O'er-importuned brows becloud the mandate,
- Carelessness or consciousness—the gesture.
- For he bears an ancient wrong about him,
- Sees and knows again those phalanxed faces,

Hears, yet one time more, the 'customed prelude—

"How shouldst thou, of all men, smite, and save us?"

Guesses what is like to prove the sequel—

"Egypt's flesh-pots—nay, the drought was better."

\mathbf{x}

Oh, the crowd must have emphatic warrant!

Theirs, the Sinai-forehead's cloven brilliance,

Right-arm's rod-sweep, tongue's imperial fiat.

Never dares the man put off the prophet.

ΧI

Did he love one face from out the thousands,

(Were she Jethro's daughter, white and wifely,

Were she but the Æthiopian bondslave,)

He would envy you dumb patient camel,

Keeping a reserve of scanty water Meant to save his own life in the desert;

Ready in the desert to deliver (Kneeling down to let his breast be opened)

Hoard and life together for his mistress.

XII

I shall never, in the years remaining,

Paint you pictures, no, nor carve you statues,

Make you music that should allexpress me; So it seems: I stand on my attainment.

This of verse alone, one life allows me;

Verse and nothing else have I to give you.

Other heights in other lives, God willing:

All the gifts from all the heights, your own, Love!

XIII

Yet a semblance of resource avails us—

Shade so finely touched, love's sense must seize it.

Take these lines, look lovingly and nearly,

Lines I write the first time and the last time.

He who works in fresco, steals a hair-brush.

- Curbs the liberal hand, subservient proudly,
- Cramps his spirit, crowds its all in little,
- Makes a strange art of an art familiar,
- Fills his lady's missal-marge with flowerets.
- He who blows through bronze, may breathe through silver,
- Fitly serenade a slumbrous princess.
- He who writes, may write for once as I do.

XIV

- Love, you saw me gather men and women,
- Live or dead or fashioned by my fancy,
- Enter each and all, and use their service,

Speak from every mouth,—the speech, a poem.

Hardly shall I tell my joys and sorrows,

Hopes and fears, belief and disbelieving:

I am mine and yours—the rest be all men's,

Karshish, Cleon, Norbert, and the fifty.

Let me speak this once in my true person,

Not as Lippo, Roland, or Andrea, Though the fruit of speech be just this sentence:

Pray you, look on these my men and women,

Take and keep my fifty poems finished;

Where my heart lies, let my brain lie also!

Poor the speech; be how I speak, for all things.

- Not but that you know me! Lo, the moon's self!
- Here in London, yonder late in Florence,
- Still we find her face, the thrice-transfigured.
- Curving on a sky imbrued with colour,
- Drifted over Fiesole by twilight,
- Came she, our new crescent of a hair's-breadth.
- Full she flared it, lamping Samminiato,
- Rounder 'twixt the cypresses and rounder,
- Perfect till the nightingales applauded.
- Now, a piece of her old self, impoverished,
- Hard to greet, she traverses the house-roofs,

Hurries with unhandsome thrift of silver,

Goes dispiritedly, glad to finish.

XVI

What, there's nothing in the moon noteworthy?

Nay: for if that moon could love a mortal,

Use, to charm him (so to fit a fancy),

All her magic ('t is the old sweet mythos),

She would turn a new side to her mortal,

Side unseen of herdsman, huntsman, steersman—

Blank to Zoroaster on his terrace, Blind to Galileo on his turret, Dumb to Homer, dumb to Keats—

him, even!

- Think, the wonder of the moonstruck mortal—
- When she turns round, comes again in heaven,
- Opens out anew for worse or better!
- Proves she like some portent of an iceberg
- Swimming full upon the ship it founders,
- Hungry with huge teeth of splintered crystals?
- Proves she as the paved work of a sapphire
- Seen by Moses when he climbed the mountain?
- Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu
- Climbed and saw the very God, the Highest,
- Stand upon the paved work of a sapphire.
- Like the bodied heaven in his clearness

Shone the stone, the sapphire of that paved work,

When they are and drank and saw God also!

xvII

What were seen? None knows, none ever shall know.

Only this is sure—the sight were other,

Not the moon's same side, born late in Florence,

Dying now impoverished here in London.

God be thanked, the meanest of his creatures

Boasts two soul-sides, one to face the world with,

One to show a woman when he loves her!

XVIII

- This I say of me, but think of you, Love!
- This to you—yourself my moon of poets!
- Ah, but that 's the world's side, there 's the wonder,
- Thus they see you, praise you, think they know you!
- There, in turn I stand with them and praise you—
- Out of my own self, I dare to phrase it.
- But the best is when I glide from out them,
- Cross a step or two of dubious twilight,
- Come out on the other side, the novel
- Silent silver lights and darks undreamed of,

9

Where I hush and bless myself with silence.

XIX

Oh, their Rafael of the dear Madonnas,

Oh, their Dante of the dread Inferno,

Wrote one song—and in my brain I sing it,

Drew one angel—borne, see, on my bosom!

R. B.

PROSPICE

FEAR death?—To feel the fog in my throat,

The mist in my face,

When the snows begin, and the blasts denote

I am nearing the place,
The power of the night, the press
of the storm,

The post of the foe;

Where he stands, the Arch Fear in a visible form,

Yet the strong man must go:

For the journey is done and the summit attained,

And the barriers fall,

Though a battle 's to fight ere the guerdon be gained,

The reward of it all.

I was ever a fighter, so—one fight more,

The best and the last!

I would hate that death bandaged my eyes, and forbore,

And bade me creep past.

No! let me taste the whole of it, fare like my peers

The heroes of old,

Bear the brunt, in a minute pay glad life's arrears

Of pain, darkness and cold.

For sudden the worst turns the best to the brave,

The black minute 's at end,

And the elements' rage, the fiend-voices that rave,

Shall dwindle, shall blend,

Shall change, shall become first a peace out of pain,
Then a light, then thy breast,
O thou soul of my soul! I shall clasp thee again,
And with God be the rest!

"O LYRIC LOVE"

(FROM "THE RING AND THE BOOK")

- O LYRIC Love, half angel and half bird,
- And all a wonder and a wild desire,—
- Boldest of hearts that ever braved the sun,
- Took sanctuary within the holier blue,
- And sang a kindred soul out to his face,—
- Yet human at the red-ripe of the heart—
- When the first summons from the darkling earth

- Reached thee amid thy chambers, blanched their blue,
- And bared them of the glory—to drop down,
- To toil for man, to suffer or to die,—
- This is the same voice: can thy soul know change?
- Hail then, and hearken from the realms of help!
- Never may I commence my song, my due
- To God who best taught song by gift of thee,
- Except with bent head and beseeching hand—
- That still, despite the distance and the dark,
- What was, again may be; some interchange
- Of grace, some splendour once thy very thought,

Some benediction anciently thy smile:

—Never conclude, but raising hand and head

Thither where eyes, that cannot reach, yet yearn

For all hope, all sustainment, all reward,

Their utmost up and on,—so blessing back

In those thy realms of help, that heaven thy home,

Some whiteness which, I judge, thy face makes proud,

Some wanness where, I think, thy foot may fall!



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